

Title: Interview with John Phoebus

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Location: Office of John Phoebus, Salisbury, MD.

Interviewer(s): Mia Butta and Will Schatz

Interviewee: John Phoebus

Introduction: John Phoebus speaks on his experiences with the City of Crisfield, as a nearly life-long resident, local attorney, and an active member of the community through participating in Crisfield groups and event planning. He also reminisces on the bustling waterfront and seafood economy that left Crisfield after Hurricane Sandy.

[Transcription begins]

Mia Butta (Butta): My name is Mia.

Will Schatz (Schatz): I'm Will.

Butta: And we're here with John today at Salisbury to do an interview with him. So we can start with the first question. How long have you lived in Crisfield, in the Crisfield area?

John Phoebus (Phoebus): Alright, so my entire life, I'm 53 years old. I was born in 1972. There was a brief time I think from 1997 to 2001 when I lived in Salisbury, but I've either lived in Crisfield, well never within the municipality, but with the Crisfield address, except for those four years for my entire life.

Butta: So you were born in Crisfield?

Phoebus: Well, technically everyone's born in Salisbury, in the Salisbury hospital, but like I was-

Butta: Yup, gotcha.

Phoebus: -but like my- my parents resided in Crisfield when- when I was born.

Butta: So what keeps you staying in Crisfield?

Phoebus: As a saying, you probably have heard this if you talk to Crisfielder's, we have marsh mud between our toes. That's I, at- at various points in my life thought of living elsewhere and it's the small-town nature of Crisfield, the friendliness of the people there. Basically, not just

your neighbors are your friends, but like the whole town feels like it's a close-knit community. People stick together when things go wrong, everybody kind of sees that they're in it together and it just a great sense of community there, and I can't imagine finding that in other places like around here that I would live.

Schatz: What is or are some of your most cherished memories of Crisfield?

Phoebus: Like the best memories I've had with Crisfield? So I mean I think you know it's that the- the sense of community like as a kid going over to friends' houses and everybody plays in everybody's backyard, so like you know, you're like everybody's parents kind of acts like you're one of their members of the family, so, I mean, that- that for me was great as a child growing up just being able to have. You know, we would ride bikes to each other's houses. We would just play in the backyards of- of everyone and- and there's people we grew up together and, you know, we still stay in touch with- with people together.

Butta: Would you say that like being near the water you did a lot of water-based activities growing up in Crisfield?

Phoebus: Yes.

Butta: Some people mentioned the Crab Derby, that that's like a really popular one.

Phoebus: Absolutely. In fact, my- my dad, he used to MC the crab races at the Crab Derby. So I was a kid growing up, dad would be the announcer of the crab races, and they have heaps of crabs that race and stuff like that. And he died in 2001, and I guess about 10 or 15 years ago, there was a gap, but I was asked to continue MCing the crab races like- like in his honor. So, yeah, those sort of seafood festivals and stuff have always been important. I never really spent time recreationally on the water because dad's boat sunk in 1977 when I was five years old. So I never, I was a child when mom and dad went out on the boat. I got a boat myself during COVID. So like, I'm- I'm late in life in terms of enjoying the water from a recreational perspective, but definitely love the fresh seafood, and it isn't just also being close by to the water, it's just it's beautiful to be able to see. Crisfield has the most beautiful sunset you'll ever see.

Butta: Yeah, you're actually like the third person that's talked about the sunsets. Do you have any children?

Phoebus: I don't.

Schatz: How do you entertain yourself in Crisfield?

Phoebus: So we recently have formed a social club called the High Tide Club. It's a 501C7 organization, so it's basically a private membership club that a lot of us belong to. I'm also a member of the Sons of the American Legion, the Crisfield Elks Club, so I participate in lots of

those activities. The- there are not a lot of restaurants to eat out at anymore, that- that kind of has all fallen by the wayside, so what used to happen before COVID was we would go to a great restaurant in town called Watermen's Inn and Friday night was like locals night at Watermen's Inn, so everybody would like see each other there. But I've got a dog that I enjoy walking through town and playing with. We've got to boat they enjoy taking out, take my friends out on, and there's lots of activities in Crisfield. We've got Soft Shell Festival coming up Memorial Day weekend, we formed a non-profit organization called Rising Tide Crisfield recently, and we're bringing back something called the Tangier Sound Music Festival. In the early 1990s, there was a state grant from Governor Schaefer that put a country music festival called the Tangier Sound Country Music Festival in Crisfield for five or six years in a row. People for my entire life have said, "I wish, I wish 'they' would bring the Tangier Sound Music Festival back," and my friends and I sat around and said, "Why not make us 'they'?" So we've raised some money to do it, and we've got like five big country stars come in a big stage thing, so it cost us like a- almost \$100,000 to do it. We're going to do a Memorial Day weekend. So.

Butta: That sounds amazing.

Phoebus: It's gonna be a lot of fun.

Butta: I guess the last kind of background question that we have is [inaudible], what role does the waterfront or the Chesapeake Bay play in recreation and social life for the community overall and also you as well?

Phoebus: I- I- I think like almost anything you do in Crisfield is you're either eating food that came from the Chesapeake Bay, you're enjoying the view of, it's really the Tangier Sound not the Chesapeake Bay, but you're enjoyed the view of the water that you're on or you're engaged in activity on the water. So, if we didn't have the access to the waterfront, Crisfield probably wouldn't exist. I mean it's just it, I'm sure there'd be a community of but like I mean almost everything we do is, I think, in some part or another derived from the water, especially, you know, it's about to be crab, crabbing season that started on April 1, so we will pretty soon start getting all that fresh crab meat, which is great.

Butta: Okay, moving on to more flooding and storms questions. Have you noticed changes in the land, water, or flooding in Crisfield, and if so, how these changes affect your daily life?

Phoebus: Absolutely, there is a- I- I attribute it to the development of the condominiums on the waterfront and that has impeded the ability of water to naturally flow off. So Crisfield has always had tight, like storm events and tide events and someone once explained to me like if you imagine a saucer that a coffee cup could be in. Crisfield used to be a saucer, that was like upside down with like the highland in the middle and everything would like flow out to the water. And then when we built condominiums around the edge of it, it's like we turned the saucer upside down. And so you have all these impervious surfaces that have been created like on the

waterfronts by zero-foot setback condominium that have just built right up to the edge. And there wasn't a thought given to what impact that would have on the flow of the water in and out of town. So I think that definitely is an impact. I know the tide gates. If you guys are doing the study, you're familiar with the tide gates. I think that there's failed tide gates-

Butta: Yeah.

Phoebus: -that the city has.

Butta: I saw on the City of Crisfield's website, the FEMA, I thought FEMA was- was going to be working in there to try and address some of those but-

Phoebus: Yeah.

Butta: I wasn't sure about that.

Phoebus: So, the, yeah, the way the tide gates work is they are designed to only allow the flow of water in one direction. And I think John Hickman told me this like, that a bottle like this is capable of keeping the tide gate open and completely destroying the function of it. So you've got just, it's probably an engineering thing. There- there's also some lift stations with respect to the water that failed. And I think a- a more prevalent thing, and this is something that the city is really not in control of, there used to be a- a tremendous amount of ditching that occurred on long roads next to residential property. And people will buy a house and they will go to the county commissioner and they'll say, "I'd like to fill this ditch in." And over the years, the county has allowed people to fill in the natural ditching on roads and what happens is when my ditch, which is open, is flooded up with was clogged up with debris, I can see the debris, but when you fill it in and you put a culvert in there and it's less apparent as to the impediments to the flow of water so trash can get in what are filled ditches that are now buried culverts and then the trash ends up staying in there, so, I think that's kind of like the man-made sides of things. I think there's also just the very great reality of sea-level rise and, you know, Crisfield is probably- the highest point in Crisfield is a pile of oyster shells. You y'all familiar with this aren't you that like from the post office down to the waterfront, Crisfield's built on oyster shells and there's this- there's this- there's a great map of the City of Crisfield circa 1900, and you could buy a quarter mile straight out and it was water and as long as you filled it in, you could get to keep what was there and so, there's this old circa 1900 map of the City of Crisfield where they had what were called water lots. And so people, all the packing houses, the history of seafood is that the oyster boom happened around the turn of the century, and then the crab boom happened in the early 80s. And so with all the oyster boom, they would have, literally, it was a town that was built on oyster shells that they were able to throw oyster shells out.

Butta: And circling back real quick to the condominiums that you were talking about, would you say that most of them are being used or do you think there's like high vacancy rates, like do you it was a good, a good idea to have those condominiums?

Phoebus: It's funny because like there's a history of Crisfield where I was part of a ragtag group of people, called- what did we call ourselves? Clean Sweep. There's- there's a group that came to town called Crisfield Associates and they were going to engage in a public-private partnership to redevelop Crisfield like St. Michael's or Cape Charles and a whole bunch of people all aligned by the common, "Not in my backyard, I don't want that to happen," but for different reasons, got together and ran out of their current mayor and council and put in a bunch of the people that were against at least that one developer. That was probably the best chance Crisfield had of some sensible development of mixed-use development that would be a little more even-handed and stuff. It probably wouldn't. I didn't like it because they gave it just to this one group of people without like giving any other people a chance for it. Other people didn't like it because they were like, "I got here, let's not build anything else." So that happened about the same time as the condominiums came in. We're talking like the mid-2000s and then of course there's- you study history the- there's a real estate crisis that happened, the mortgage lending crisis where people have been it was easy to get a mortgage then all of a sudden the real estate lending market dried up, so it was very hard to buy the things because the banks weren't lending money for it, so that stopped the condominiums. But at one point in time, Crisfield had more vacant for sale condominiums than Ocean City did, and that's an incred-, even at the height of it, there were probably more than the market could support. I think they've all priced to where they belong and so they are affordable. I don't think that what the builders of the condominiums envision[ed] in terms of it has actually come to bear. I think it's a combination of verbose [correction: usage]. You know, people have something to hold for investment. They're like family members live there for kind of less than market rent. Other people have like sold their houses and retired there. I don't get the sense that they are full. I don't know that there are many that are for sale, but I don't know that they are completely full. I never see the parking lots completely full of people, so that tells me if they may be owned, but they may just be used as like vacation property for people from- from the city.

Schatz: How have you personally prepared for flooding or severe storms which may impact your ability to get to work?

Phoebus: Yeah, so I mean, once a month, the street between my house and, I have an office in Crisfield is so underwater that if I didn't have a car that's lifted up and smart enough to drive slow, I wouldn't be able to walk there. I mean it's that much water in town. We have probably four times a year, you know, high tide or flooding events that make everything from, you know, that library that I think you guys are meeting in on down to the water almost impassable. I mean that dual highway we have there, you'll see. Crisfielders called it the Strip. Someone once humorously said, Crisfield's the only town in the world that has a dual highway that goes

nowhere. And, but kids, when I was a kid we would drive around in circles and beep and wave at each other. This was before cell phones, like the only way you had to meet kids in high school was like to see what everyone else was doing. So, we would all like drive in circles and then pull over at Gordon's and get a coke together. But you know that [in] the middle of that is a huge stormwater management thing, which is very frequently flowed up beyond, filled up beyond capacity that causes impassable roads. Right now, I have relatively high land I live on, but my neighbor's yard is completely underwater. I can't, when I walk my dog I have to dry his feet off every day when I come back for the entire past week, ever since the rain we had last weekend so. It's- it's- it's very apparent, it- it's very much there. I mean, we're kind of used to the ground squishing when we walk, but like we're not really used to water standing there and like, and over years, it's very much standing there now.

Schatz: Do you see others or the city entirely prepared for such events?

Phoebus: I think we're better post-Sandy, Hurricane Sandy, than we are pre-Sandy. When Hurricane Sandy came, Hurricane Sandy is one of the main reasons that I love Crisfield and I will never leave Crisfield and just seeing how everyone came together after that storm event was incredible, and like the sense of being in a symbiotic relationship with all the people that live in your same town. I did have a Salisbury office at the time of Hurricane Sandy, and I was like smugly sitting back thinking my house didn't flood, my office didn't flood, I'm fine. And then I realized like all my business came from people who were in town, and they were suffering and because they were suffering, I didn't have work. So I helped form the Somerset County Long-Term Recovery Committee. Basically took a year off to like help get the church groups organized, come to town, volunteering to rebuild some stuff. So I- I- I don't know that anyone's prepared for a storm of a century to hit their town. Because that has happened, I think that it has made, like there's talk right now, maybe when we rebuild the fire department, we're gonna put it in an area that doesn't flood, so it would be more able to protect people. And yeah, and fire departments don't protect people from storms, you know, it- it's- it's the berms out in the marshes that protect us from storms, it's the stormwater gates, it's the, you know, more sense in terms of some urban planning that protects us. I think it's better. I don't think we're anywhere near where we need to be. I think- I think an issue always is that like the- the city leadership is only able to control what's in the city, there's a lot of stuff that happens in the county that doesn't have like the same vision. The biggest mistake the City of Crisfield ever made was they let the county hook into their wastewater treatment plant without the people who hooked in paying city taxes. Normally if you want to be able to use city water and sewer, the trade-off is you are then part of the city. You're annexed in and you have to pay, you know, taxes. They created something called the Somerset County Sanitary District which lets all the County tap the city resources but then not be part of the tax base that helps the city run, and then it also makes there not really be any leadership of the areas outside of the municipality, so like I mean the city can only do what's in it, like you've seen the map it's fairly tiny footprint, then you see the number of houses, you know, like it's- it's a lot more people who reside in the greater Crisfield area and the development

that occurs there. I mean, there's the Critical Areas Law. I'm sure you've like learned about that with this stuff, but yeah, there there's, you know, for leadership in terms of like what's going to make the flooding and stuff better, there's not like a single voice on the ground to do it.

Butta: So I'm aware that there's only one main grocery store, the Food Lion that's in Crisfield. Would you say that stock, like food stock changes leading up to like larger events like Hurricane Sandy? Do you think that they had, that there was a negative effect on food supply?

Phoebus: The interesting thing about Hurricane Sandy is the Social Service, the Department of Social Services said to everybody in town, "Hey, guess what? Because there's a hurricane that's hit your town, we're going to provide food assistance to everyone, regardless of what their income is." And Crisfield had a lot of proud people who were living at or below the poverty level for which they would have qualified for food assistance. And the cool thing about Sandy is it got a whole bunch of people signed up for stuff that helped them bridge the gap between what they were able to afford through the income that they had through their jobs and what their families needed. So, it got lot of people who were too proud to go get, you know, I don't know what it's called, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, SNAP benefits, EBT benefits. It- it plugged people into a social services system that probably wasn't otherwise there. I don't know that we ever ran out of food in Sandy. I mean I, flood events, like, you know, they didn't kill power, food didn't spoil. I mean some people were without power for like a day or two, but like, I- I don't think anyone went hungry during Sandy. I- I grew up at a time when there were three grocery stores in town, Ward's Crossing, Meatland, and Riggins, and Food Lion. Food Lion didn't put them out of business, Dollar General put them out of the business. Dollar General just built closer to the housing projects and like the support for any grocery store is that EBT card with the regular thing by people who aren't able to drive to the stores. Most people who have cars or have jobs are getting in their car and driving to Walmart to get the food because it's cheaper than Food Lion.

Butta: Are there any storms or flooding events that you remember most vividly, and you did touch on Hurricane Sandy, if you want to go into more detail about that-.

Phoebus: Sure.

Butta: Or any other events that you remembered?

Phoebus: Yeah, I think there were probably three in my lifetime. One was the blizzard of 1977 when the Tangier Sound froze and people could walk from Crisfield to Smith Island. That was probably like the most, you know, vivid, you know, like shut-in type stuff from a storm. There were I want to say in 2000, March of 2001, there were straight line winds in March that caused a tremendous amount of like, what- what I'd always associate with hurricanes, which is like the destruction from winds. And, you know, it's- it's really the rain that comes before the wind that makes the ground soft and makes the trees easier to blow down and cause the stuff. It's not, I

mean, some things become airborne, but it's usually trees hitting houses. And in that storm, I remember trees falling on all sides of my houses, like lots of people having, you know, pretty like immediate significant structural damage, but like, you know, fixable stuff, and no losses of life. Sandy was like just so different because I mean we all probably have PTSD from it. I'm exaggerating. It wasn't that traumatic, but I mean like we, what we were trained to expect from a storm, which was the winds and all that had come and passed, we're like, "Huh, we- we dodged a bullet." What happened was the pervasive winds kept a tide up, and then another tide came in on top of it, and then that created the flooding and. A- a friend of mine, Pastor Phil Huber, who you guys should probably talk to, even though he's not a Crisfielder, he was active in the Hurricane Sandy recovery effort. I'd be glad to give you his contact information. Phil said he- he- he was with an organization called VOAD, Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster. He was the president of the Maryland chapter of that. Lutheran pastor by trade, profession, I guess, pastoring is profession, not a trade, and he helped lead the group with the organization that we created, the group of volunteers that came to town. Phil always said, "If- if you get your pick, you should hope to get hit by a tornado because it makes for sexier television." Like no one ever looks at a picture of a town whose flood waters have receded and says, "Oh my gosh, there's poor people," because all the houses look exactly the same. When the tornado comes through your town, all the house are torn down, and like you can have the before and after picture. The before and after picture of a flooded town looks exactly the same as the before picture. Now, I mean, this was before drone footage. It would have been fascinating to me to, if we had had, you know, easily available recreational drones that you could have flown over Crisfield to see where the cameras were, to see what the floodwaters were. Because, I mean, there were entire areas of the down neck area of Crisfield, which I'm sure you've heard about if you're doing this thing. There's the most low-lying areas in Calvary that were like under, you know, three, four feet of water. People were like, you know, you know water was in their houses. They had to evacuate to get out there, but it- it just caused so much damage to the houses because the water comes up, you know, things are floating and it goes, and the mold stays in you have to like almost tear half the house and the drywall and down out the stuff, so it just- just was incredible the damage it did and I- I had previously thought that like to recover from a storm is just like chainsaws and trees and rakes and, you know, guys in trucks can haul off trash and the houses get torn down, you rebuild it. I had no idea that, you know, 10 years later we would still be, you know, picking up pieces from Sandy. It's truly a long-term recovery effort.

Butta: Yeah, so you would say that you're still recovering from that still today?

Phoebus: Yeah, I mean, it's- it's Sandy like made she, I mean, there are things that like got knocked out of town that never came back, and I mean, you know, it's you know. People may attribute to COVID some of it, but I think like it really started with Sandy in terms of just the- the impact that had because, you know, some people didn't rebuild some people just, you know, moved elsewhere. I mean, it's not as much as like New Orleans, you know, after Katrina were people like who are relocated to Houston never came back, but like me there just- there's some

houses that didn't have insurance that didn't do the recovery stuff that, you know, have, I mean, not been rebuilt or and probably are not able to be moved into. I mean, I think it majorly, it'd be interesting to see the population numbers because I feel very sure that the population, at least within the municipal boundary and within the census thing, are down after Sandy just because of the- the loss of- of housing units.

Schatz: Do you feel climate change is something people in Crisfield actively discuss and plan for?

Phoebus: I- I think climate change is so influenced by politics in a way that prevents people of a certain political bent from acknowledging what everyone sees and Crisfield probably is, it's what they- they say Republicans are red, so it's pretty red. And so I think because, you know, Donald Trump tells people that climate change is imaginary, people feel that they- they have to say that, but then I also think that more than anybody, we are like, when I was a child growing up, there were 30 packing houses in town. A packing house is a seafood manufacturing company that buys crabs and hires people to pick the crab meat out of the crabs or to wrap the soft crabs and to pack them off for shipping. There was an active train that came to Crisfield when I was a child that still came to town to get the shipments of that seafood to take out of town. There are now, you have the MeTompkin Bay Oyster Company, Handy's, and Southern Connections Seafood and only two of those actually pack crabs. So, you know, they're- they're importers, they're buyers and sellers of seafood, but in terms of packing houses that are employing like 50 to 200 people per packing house, that all has changed in my 53 years of living. That is a result of- a partial result of climate change. It's also a partial results of runoff from farming and the realization that pollution in the Chesapeake Bay affects the health of the seafood in the bay, but like I mean, you know, you can- you can just see physical footprints changing. You can see over the years land that was above water is now below water more often that's not, things that were the definition of wetlands, you know, like water that- that stays on lands that like, you know, I mean someone once said to me, "The test is like when you go to lift your foot out of the mud, does it kind of make that sucking sound if it's behind it?" When you're walking through marshes, fields, open areas, your feet are going to- you wouldn't wear your nice shoes there and the boots that you would put on to wear there would make that suck and stuck in it sound. So, I think the evidence is right in front of people and certainly our friends on Smith Island. I'm sure you're familiar with Smith Island, it's, you know, three inhabited islands that are part of Somerset County, Ewell, Tylerton, and Rhodes Point. Two of those, Ewell and Rhodes Point, were- are connected by a causeway which is washed out more than it is not. So you- you have to take a boat to get from Ewell to- to Rhodes Point more than you can drive from Ewell to Rhodes Point, so I- I- I- I think that it's unfortunately something that's become politicized. I think when all the homeowners insurance companies are now pulling out of Maryland, especially on the Eastern Shore, people are seeing a lot more, almost everyone I know, not everyone I know. Fellow homeowners that I talked to about like, "What's your electric bill?" Two-thirds of the people I talked to had got their homeowners insurance canceled this year because a major homeowner insurance, different

companies pulled out of Maryland. So, now we're at like a different property insurance company. So, I- I think like they're pulling out because of climate change. So, I think the signs are there. I- I think a lot of people won't ever acknowledge it because Donald Trump has told them it doesn't exist and, you know, they just are buying hook, line and sinker with the rhetoric of that.

Butta: So you'd say that mostly they're apprehensive because of how hot topic it is politically?

Phoebus: I- I- I- I feel like, you know, it's- it's probably a by-product of the way politics has come. Tip O'Neil once said, "All politics is local." I think it's so untrue now because you have such a loud spokesman at the head of, he's not the head the Republican Party. He's the head of Donald Trump, that- who demands 100% loyalty, 100% lockstep, thinking what he says is the right thing to think, so I think it's taken away the ability for people to say, "Yeah, I generally I like Republicans because I like guns. I'm pro, you know, national defense, I don't want my taxes to be too high. But he's wrong with climate change because my town's under water." And now you can't even say, "But he was wrong on climate change cause my town is under water," because like your next-door neighbor's a Trump loyalist who's gonna say, "Donald Trump says climate change is imaginary. It's just the Joe Biden Democrats saying that sort of thing." So, I think, like that prevents there from being real discussion of it and it is unfortunate. It need not be politicized because I don't think it is. What Neil deGrasse Tyson said, "The great thing about science is it works whether people believe it or not, like it's just science," so I think climate change is, and science can always be used to advance certain agendas, but I mean think the track record just in my 53 years on this Earth is that, you know, seas are rising, and temperatures are getting warmer, and climate change is real, and I'm a Republican.

Butta: Could you imagine any ways that you could help facilitate, or like just in general, the city could help to facilitate better conversations about the issue of climate change?

Phoebus: Yeah, I- I- I think like, not calling it climate change, you know, I think it's- it's too loaded of a phrase, but just talk about, you know, I think something that resonates with everybody is the concept of resiliency and. If you are a progressive liberal, you think of resiliency as what government and society can do to help everyone. When you are a individual rights conservative, you think of a resiliency as things that I'm able to do and like kind of unifies everybody together. And like, you know, I think just redefining it as something that is, you know, we want our community to be here a hundred years from now and we need to be- be stronger together. And to- to like, it just needs, you know, a PR makeover, I think. And I think the- the key thing is that it needs to be what we discovered with Long-Term Recovery Committee is you have to not work within traditional government structure. You have to kind of work kind of from a grassroots level, and like we found the churches to be a great place that is where the community can get met. The church has let us reach out to African-American communities a lot better than we would have through government. And so churches, organizations, associations, you kind of get all those people together and you always keep a seat

at the table [open] and you let the community kind of form its own group, which very well may include the mayor, may include county commissioner, may include the EPA, but you know it- it would have the- be more home grown as opposed to like imposed from the outside. And, and I think that- I think that would be the way to create leadership from it.

Schatz: Have you participated in any community events surrounding the issue of flooding?

Phoebus: Yeah, I haven't gone to any of these recent workshops on it, I...

Butta: Are you talking about the Crisfield Resilience Academy?

Phoebus: Yeah, yeah, I- I've read about it. I, when Steve, this is how long it's been, Steve Marshall was the emergency services director, and he put together a group to look at the- there are berms, what they call them, we were studying tax ditches, drainage, and then the- the- the series of berms out in the marshes off of Crisfield that-

Butta: Bulkheads?

Phoebus: It's a little bit bulkheading, but there's like out in the marshes is there are like these artificially created like four or five foot high like flood, I think they call them berms, these barriers, and they- you can only see them if you're in like a really low level boat and so they put together some mapping some data that and they were just trying to like, take a snapshot of where things were and then, you know, just it was- it was kind of top-down county officials that made them, may have been part of a grant, I think. I sat on a couple of those things but not- not the recent stuff.

Butta: Have you or anyone you know had to move or make major repairs to your home because of the flooding or rising water levels?

Phoebus: Not my home, my law office. We got a, from Hurricane Sandy we got a FEMA, no not FEMA, we had flood insurance and we tapped into our flood insurance and did about \$60,000 of repair work from water inundation, both flood water and stormwater inundation that occurred during Hurricane Sandy. So, that's definitely happened. [object falls] I probably know a dozen people who've- who had major damages from Hurricane Sandy, just I mean it- it's it's, I mean, it felt like a third of the people I know who own their houses had something to do from it and that was mostly Hurricane Sandy.

Schatz: How has the local economy, particularly industries like fishing, crabbing, tourism, have changed over the years?

Phoebus: So, when I was 14 years old in 1983, there's a- a restaurant Crisfield called Captain's Galley that would stay open on Friday and Saturday night until 2 a.m. and they were- had a line out the door of people to come in. The Somers Cove Marina was full every weekend and the

transient boat slips, there was a demand for people to get those boat slips. There was an active hunting and fishing charter industry. There were people taking boats to town, flying into town. It seemed like there was something going on every weekend. We had Captain's Galley, Side Street, Watermen's Inn, Cozy Corner, Barrel Wharf, Circle Inn, you know, six absolutely active, you know, line out the door, can't get a table at six o'clock on a Saturday night unless you have reservations, restaurants that just were tremendously going on. That was also during the height of the crabbing industry. Crabbing hit its peak in the early 80s, so there was a lot of wealth in Crisfield and people were making a lot of money doing seafood. The crabs were plentiful, seafood fishing was plentiful. There, everybody had big pleasure boats. I mean, like the Crisfielders had, you know, what now would be three quarter million dollar, you know, sports fishing yachts in the marina. Back then they were probably \$200,000. So I think there was a lot more. The town had a Rubberset and it's still there. It had Carvel Hall and had Mrs. Paul's kitchen. It has three jobs that- three factories in town that ran three shifts a day. So, you know, people were working. There was- there was a lot of lot of employment, a lot of jobs and there aren't those jobs anymore. The seafood industry has slowed up. The restaurants have, with I think the lack of wealth, there's been a decrease in the demand for it. I think that COVID, some restaurants thrived during COVID, some failed and I don't think it was just a- a choice whether you wanted to say, "Hey, I'm gonna make a big run of it and shift my whole mindset and do carry-out drinks and, you know, social media type apps," and very set in their way places just said, "Hey, we're not gonna do anything anymore." But then, unfortunately, that has kind of led to like they're kind of being like a, I mean, I can have fun in Crisfield because I have a boat and I cook and I'm a member of a private club. I don't know if you could have fun at Crisfield because you aren't a member of that club, you don't have a friend who has a boat, and you're not going to have the same experience that I would. It's like, I think, it was a bit of unfortunate exacerbation of the difference between the haves and have-nots in town, and that makes it harder for people to stay because, you know, I mean, my family. I didn't need to make it. My family just put me where I am right now, and I'm successful, but like I don't know if you were like trying to work your way up and like save money for a house and like start a family you would choose to stay in Crisfield, because I don't think the employment would be there, I don't think there'd be stuff to do, and I don't think people are waiting around for that to happen. So, like, you know, if you're 50 and older and you made it, you have a good time there. If you're any younger, if you're looking for somewhere else to go. So, I think, I mean, and there's been national things with the economy too, but like I mean, I think the seafood industry has definitely dried up. That was the basis of the tourism industry and the basis of wealth and yeah.

Butta: So, do you think that the economy could be changed and turned around to where you could see people going there to start a family in the future or?

Phoebus: We're trying it of all things by doing this music festival. It's just like a shot in the arm it's like the one thing people said, "Hey, I really wish that this would come back." We set it up as a 501C3, so we're gonna like if we make money from it, we're gonna do it for five years. Maybe

we'll throw it back into like, you know, giving people grants to start businesses and stuff like that. I, when I was 35 years old, I want[ed] to change the world [as] President of the Chamber of Commerce and running for political office and like thinking I can make [a difference]. I mean everyone in Crisfield wants to turn Crisfield into Cape Charles or turn Crisfield into St. Michael's and- and the fact of the matter is at every time in the past when we tried to do that, we weren't close enough to Norfolk, Virginia Beach, or close enough, to DC, Annapolis for people to live there and then still work in those places. Now with Zoom and internet, I, people have the ability to do it, and- and I would love to see Crisfield try to appeal to like this, you know, almost like, you know, work from home, you know, maybe if we get some shared workspace type thing. People who come to Crisfield discover that they can do everything, I mean, I don't need to come, we could have done this by Zoom. I'm glad we're doing it in person just because I'm not a Zoom-type person, but like, you know, there's plenty of jobs that people all day long just drive to an office and Zoom other people for, from you could do that in Crisfield. And like I wish more people, you know, were getting some interest from interesting retirees from different backgrounds. Previously, retirees to Crisfield were people who were born in Crisfield, who came back home and now we're seeing people who are choosing to live in Crisfield from somewhere else. They're still retirees, but like only semi-retired, and so like they're able to like contribute and kind of like a volunteerism maybe meaningful way to the community. I'd love to attract like a little younger, I'm trying to tap in some of these guys. I've got a plan to, I've got a back of an envelope business plan to open a brewery in Crisfield. My partner won't let me, but I've gotten the funding for it and I just need to find someone to run the thing. If you guys want to run a brewery, I'm taking applications for it. But, you know, I think we could do some fun stuff in town, but like so much of- it's just like, I mean, chicken and an egg type thing, because like, you know every- everyone's great business idea requires there to be people there to go spend the money and like, you know, it's until the people are there to spend the money, it just, it is just hard.

Schatz: How are businesses doing in Crisfield? How's the future for local businesses looking?

Butta: We asked that question.

Schatz: We did?

Butta: Yeah.

Schatz: Oh, do you have any opinions on how the city, county, and state has handled the issues of flooding in Crisfield?

Phoebus: Huh, I think from a municipal and county level. Until about 10 years ago, as is true with everywhere, any investment in infrastructure was just put off to the next generation because it was too easy to keep taxes low and to not do the plan ahead-type things and then infrastructure that outlived its useful life, kept working and so people were like, "Well until it's broken, we're

not going to fix it." So there was like, lack of continual capital improvement for things that could have needed it. That is just like pass the buck to the next generation and that probably happens at every level of government, which is why the Key Bridge fell down, you know. Like I don't know that in Maryland there is the same level of investment [in] rural Eastern Shore areas as there are in the more urban developed areas of town, of the state, and I think everyone loves the- loves visiting it, like Maryland, all the Maryland government cares about is getting to Ocean City as fast as possible. So I don't think they'd like to invest in the communities on the Eastern Shore. So I think that our state government even pays attention to it. And I think that their the- some of the attitudes toward critical areas, toward development have been, you know, I mean, the- the Critical Area Laws which may be designed to protect a runoff into the Bay don't necessarily address the flooding issues that- that we have, you know. There's this idea of like not shoring up what we have so you can't build bulkhead, you can't use the traditional rip rap methods anymore, so all of these more natural things, which you may protect a little bit about flooding on the inland thing. They have this idea of like a thousand, a thousand feet from the Chesapeake Bay is your critical area, critical area. And then 100 feet is like the most critical area, but like what you do in that buffer absolutely affects things way further than that. So, I don't know that there's any looking at the, you know, if you take the Eastern Shore, then you just like say, well, here's the thousand. Like the- the part in the middle critical area what they're doing here is absolutely affecting what is right there. So I, I don't know that the policies were well designed for it. I don't feel any of our state-level elected officials like actually represent, like, the people on the Eastern Shore, the people in Crisfield, in Annapolis. I think they all just like go there and do their Trump or Biden little, you know, character acting type things. And I think our federal elected leadership is too focused on the state as a whole and not the issues that we have locally on it. So, I don't think they are attuned to it. I think there are some agencies that that do, I- I- I think that Maryland doesn't have a State Department of Planning and that's always been controversial. [Governor Parris Glendening] tried to do it and then it got like really fought back cause they want like development decisions to be local. But I, I don't know that locally, whether they'll let you do stuff on the county level is more like, are you friends with one of the county commissioners? Not like, is it good for the county? So I don't know that they maybe there should be a little more oversight in terms of some of the planning issues on stuff. So that- that, I think, there are some agencies that may be attuned to it, but like, it gets fault for the wrong reasons.

Butta: I'm going to skip this question since we kind of touched on it already, but so the next one is would you recommend Crisfield as a place to live?

Phoebus: I mean, my mom died four years ago, and I could have sold her house and then moved to Ocean City and I didn't, so I chose to stay. I- It's not the right place for everybody, but for certain people, who are looking for a quieter way of life, to be in touch with nature, to see beautiful sunsets, to enjoy the water. It's an amazing place to live and has amazing people in it. So I, if you are, you know, graduating Salisbury University and looking to start a family and raise a family, it's probably not the right place. If, you know, you move to Baltimore and make a

lot of money and then want to slow down and enjoy all that and, you know, bring some of that wealth to Crisfield and, you know, want to make your own way, I think that's- I'd love to see it be a place that people are attracted to at every age of their life and, but right now I don't think it's there. So, mostly yes, but I- I- I- if you asked me when I was 35 years old, you know, what I thought the future of Crisfield was, I thought, you know, "We're going, we're going to be the next Cape Charles. We're going to be the- the next St. Michael's." It's probably a- a coin toss for me 100, whether 100 years from now, Crisfield will even exist. And it's either going to thriving or it's going to be, they'll roll the streets up, take the stop signs down, unincorporate and just say, used to be a town here and here's just some houses that people are living in now.

Butta: Do you think that had you lived somewhere else other than Crisfield growing up, you would have been as in tune with the environment and had such a strong passion for environmental issues, or do you think being on the shoreline and being in that environment growing up in your whole life that really boosted your passion for it?

Phoebus: I think like everybody who lives in Crisfield has that friend who is a crabber or a waterman, and you go out on the boat and just see how they work with their hands and they work with the, you know, the bounty of the bay and how dependent they are, how dependent farmers are on the land, on the environment, and like this real sense of like stewardship that- that you have. And the state seal of Maryland has a farmer and a fisherman on it. And like, I think there's so many parts of the state where like, you can, you drive from one end of Baltimore County to the other and not encounter a farmer or a fisherman. And, you know, I every day see a farmer, every day I see a waterman. You know I routinely talk to people that are, you know, I- I mean, when I'm pumping my gas and there's a guy that is getting fuel for his boat and I ask him, "How are crabs doing?" and like, you know, I'm talking to a guy named Jay who's a waterman on almost every Friday. We run into each other at a gas pump, and I- I know whether the cold winter means the crabs are still sleeping in the mud or whether the early warm spring means that they're going to be running good this year and just having that sense of the changes of the season. I think the- the friendliness of the people and like how much you're connected to everything definitely makes you feel in tune to it. I think that there's an ability to, you know, maybe when you don't have something, you appreciate it more when you see it. So, you know, I- I went on vacation to Hawaii earlier this year. It's a beautiful place and I went talking to my friend who lives there. He probably gets used to just seeing that beauty. But then I live in a beautiful place. And you know some people who live in a concrete jungle, you know, with skyscrapers and roads and traffic and stuff like that all around them, you know, I think what I find is like sometimes quiet and boring can be very beautiful to them so maybe, maybe people from away from Crisfield can appreciate it more because it's something that is- that they don't see as much as I do on a daily basis, but I- I like to think I'm pretty tuned into it and still see the beauty of that sunset every time I take my dog for a walk at late at night.

Butta: I think we're on our last question.

Schatz: Yup, and what wisdom would you share for future generations?

Phoebus: I think stewardship is- is- is really what it boils down to. I- I think, you know, you look at the decisions people made in our country to let's do the National Park Service, to like, you know, try to put living with the land, the environment first. I'd like to remind a lot of people who are so caught up in politics that, you know, it was Teddy Roosevelt who did that, you know, people who were Republicans who did that, like, it's, you know, being stewards of the land and realizing that the little short time we have here to have an impact on our community on our land is, you know, we're- we're just caretakers of stuff for- for future generations, but the decisions we make can absolutely be terrible for future generations. So, yeah, I mean, I think that's the wisdom which is just to, you know, say, you know we're- we're just here for a little while and we have to, you know, be careful with the resources we have and careful with decisions we make because they can be very, very bad for future generations and, you know, we're just kind of hold holding that land and that water for them.

Butta: Cool, well, I think that's all we have, all the questions. That was.

[Transcript ends]